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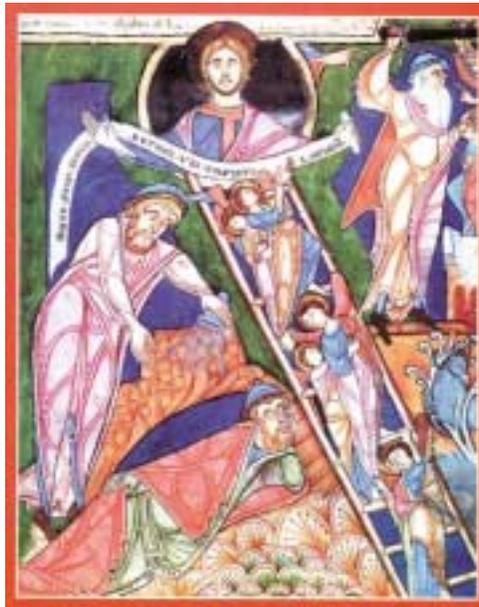
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MASONIC SYMBOLS AND SIGNPOSTS

by **Leon Zeldis, 33°**
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MASONIC SYMBOLS AND SIGNPOSTS



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INTRODUCTION: THE VALUE OF SYMBOLISM

Ours is an age of materialism and high-tech. Science explores every little corner of the universe, from the level of elementary particles to that of galaxies and the boundless universe, overwhelming us with an endless flood of facts, while imagination is banished to the sidelines of fiction. Then, if this is our current situation, why do Freemasons insist in conveying their messages through the medium of symbolism? Why do we continue performing long and complicated ceremonies? Why is Ritual the foundation of masonic teaching? Why, in the scale of Scottish Rite degrees, do we have to perform a special symbolic ceremony to advance from one to another? The physicist, the modern demiurge, manages his invisible particles in a world of infinitely precise measurements, elaborate instruments, powerful computers and mathematical analysis.

However, the human mind does not appear to work following the rules of computer logic; rather, it works on the basis of symbolic structures. Apprehension and abstraction are symbolic in nature. The language we use to reason with and to convey information is a generally accepted system of symbols. Words do not correspond to measurable physical entities. They are but shadows, images that flash in the mind and evoke associations, memories and expectations. Furthermore, most of the brain's activity goes on underneath the surface, so to say, below the level of consciousness. This activity, revealed sometimes in dreams and myths is nothing but symbols and analogies. Say I am holding in my hand the score for Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. You see a book, yet in your mind you hear the four starting notes of the music, destiny knocking at the door, or V for Victory, if you remember the Second World War. I say this is a symphony, but a scientist might claim that it is only an object weighing 400 grams, composed of wood pulp beaten into sheets, partly covered with a mixture of carbon black and glue. Who is closer to the truth? Which truth is closer to us?

I now pick up a plastic disk and say this too is Beethoven's Fifth. In my mind, they are closely related, the book and the disk are almost twins. More surprising still, they are both somehow representations of another, totally different experience, the actual concert performance of the music. The human mind has this extraordinary ability to abstract these various experiences: attending a concert, listening to a recording, reading a score, and comprising them into a single symbol: Beethoven's Fifth.

Symbols, then, are tools for thought, ways to grasp reality and to relate it to ourselves. We sometimes forget that all measurements started as proportions of the human body. An inch (a thumb's length), a palm (breadth or length of a hand), a foot, a fathom (length of out-stretched arms). The scientist has dehumanized his measurements, because his work is not done with tools adapted to the human body, but with instruments adapted to the machine.

In Masonry we look back to our human dimensions. The symbolic tools we use are intended to reveal direct insights about man, the microcosm, and the world about, the macrocosm. Masonry does not teach like in a classroom. We have no professors, but we all are apprentices, learning through work, through practice, through personal experience.

Masonic teachings are acquired and developed only by personal effort and involvement, by experiencing the ritual ceremonies. Masonic degrees cannot be received by mail or through the Internet, like diplomas after concluding a course of study. Ritual and symbol are dead letter when on the printed page. Only when the words and actions come to life, only by personally experiencing the ceremonies they become reality.

Masons assemble in lodge in order to work. Opening the lodge it is called to labor. We hold work is such high esteem, because work is essentially a personal experience. Working we must use our hands, minds and heart.

Seeing only the external aspects of ritual, one may be inclined to call it a theatrical game. Indeed, when ritual is performed without proper preparation, as a charade, a series of actions, words and gestures carried out without thought, ritual becomes a parody. But ritual can also become the key to unlock a deeper, more immediate understanding of human nature than can be imparted by logical discourse. Ritual incorporates the accumulated experience of wise men who lived in ages before science and the scientific method were dominant, an experience expressed in legends and symbols. When Freemasonry itself is considered as a philosophical institution, that is, an association of free men lovers of knowledge, then, and only then, can we begin to appreciate the value of ritual and symbol in our work. Yes, we do play a game in Masonry. It is a very ancient game, ever full of surprises. It is called the game of life. The tools that Masonry puts in our hands allow us to play the game better, with personal enjoyment and for the benefit of mankind.

I have given this book the title ‘ **Masonic Symbols and Signposts**’ to stress the fact that Masonic symbolism must be taken as our true ‘landmarks’. That is, signs to mark the boundaries of our actions. They point the way, but are not to be taken as impassable barriers. Masonic tradition should act as a compass, not an anchor.

Chapter 1

THE HIRAMIC LEGEND AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE MASTER’S DEGREE

This chapter is not concerned with the history of the Master’s degree, or the three-degree system in general, but rather with the meaning of the Hiramic legend which, as we know, lies at the core of this degree that embodies the Masonic version of the final stage of Initiation. A short bibliography at the end will be of help to those interested in pursuing further their investigation. We have no certainty about the exact date when the third degree began to be worked but, as far back as 1711, the Trinity College (Dublin) MS mentions three separate classes of Brethren: Entered Apprentices, Fellow Craftsmen and Masters, each with its own secrets.

By 1730, when Prichard’s *Masonry Dissected* was published², the three-degree system had become firmly established. The introduction of the Hiramic legend in Masonic ritual dates from the same period, as proven by the advertisement for sale in 1726 of a publication entitled *The Whole History of the Widow’s Son Killed by the Blow of a Beetle*.

The Name Hiram

The name Hiram appears in Masonic manuscripts much earlier, even centuries before, but we have no indication that the medieval mason was familiar with any tragic legend associated to that name, which appears with different spellings such as Anyone, Aman, Amon, Aymon and Hyman.

As with many other names in our rituals, we must look for its source in the Bible. There, we meet some difficulty because of the possible confusion between Hiram, king of Tyre, and the widow's son - Hiram Abif - sent to King Solomon in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the Masonic manuscripts I just mentioned may refer not to Hiram but to the Hebrew word for a craftsman or artificer: Aman or Ooman.

Much has been written about the meaning of the craftsman's name: Hiram Avi or Abif. First, we must understand that the name that appears in the Hebrew Bible has no 'f'. It appears once as 'Avi' (aleph-beth-iod) and elsewhere as 'Aviv' (aleph-beth-iod-vav). The simple or obvious translation would be 'my father' and 'his father', respectively. However, this would have no logical explanation. The Hiram sent to Jerusalem could not be the fa-ther of the Tyrian King. The root word 'av', however, has an-other, less usual meaning. In Genesis 4:8 Joseph tells his broth-ers that 'God made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire house-hold and ruler of all Egypt.' Father ('av' in the original Hebrew), in this sense has the meaning of 'councilor' or 'right-hand man'. It is more plausible that the king of Tyre would send a trusted advisor, capable of organizing and managing the complicated work of building Solomon's Temple.

The Legend

The reader is presumably familiar with the Hiramic legend as exemplified in the third-degree working. We should keep in mind, however, that like most myths, the legend is larger than any one specific recounting. Some features of Hiram Abif's sacrifice have been eliminated from some Masonic rituals, while appearing in other degrees, particularly the 4th to 14th Degrees of the Scottish Rite, belonging to the Lodge of Perfection. Another word of caution. When studying a mythical tale, we should not expect to find logic or coherence. Each and every detail of the myth has a symbolic explanation, or several; in the course of time, the story is embroidered and additions are made that not always tally with the rest. For example, we are told that the death of Hiram Abif resulted in the loss of the true secrets of the Master Mason, but we are also told that King Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre shared those secrets. This is an obvious contradiction, yet such is the nature of myth. We must accept it as it has been handed down to us..**Hiram's Murder** The hours high-twelve (noon) and midnight figure prominently in the legendary recounting of Hiram Abif's murder. Not surprisingly, these are the ritual hours of work in the first three degrees of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. Noon is the hour when the sun is at the zenith and bodies on earth cast no shadow. There is full illumination (enlightenment). Midnight, on the other hand, is symbolically the end of time and its beginning. The clock returns to zero and a new day begins.

The ruffians are three evil workers driven by ambition, envy and ignorance. Their names vary according to the texts. Here are some of the variations:

Ahram, Romvel, Gravelot or Hobbden.

Giblon, Giblas, Giblos.
Jubelas, Jubelos, Jubelum.
Methuselah, Amrou, Phanor.
Starke, Sterkin, Austerfuth or Oterfut.

The abundance of alternative names is remarkable. The same phenomenon can be observed in other, non-Masonic initiation legends, as we shall see below.

The Number Five

The raising of Hiram's body (or his surrogate) is connected with the five Points of Fellowship. The number five has a rich lore of symbolism attached to it. To begin with, the number five was held high in the highest esteem by the Pythagoreans, who called it 'Hygeia', that is Health. It was regarded as the conjunction of the first 'female' number - 2 - and the first 'male' number 3, thus being associated with marriage, or the mystic nuptials.

One, the unit, was not considered to be a number at all. Five is related to the pentagram or pentalpha, that magic five-pointed star associated everywhere with the occult. One of its properties is that every straight line in the pentagram is divided by the others in the golden section. The number five also appears in the legend as the number of fellow-crafts sent to look for Hiram: three groups of five craftsmen each.

Jones mentions that in the 16th and 17th centuries there was much public discussion on the five points, but these referred not to fellowship but to the five points of doctrine to which Calvinism had been reduced.

Five is the hypotenuse of the smallest Pythagorean triangle, that is, a right-angle triangle with integral sides. The Pythagoreans also associated this triangle with marriage, and the Pythagoras Theorem was also known as the Theorem of the Bride. Five is also the fifth Fibonacci number.

The Fibonacci series is an amazing sequence of numbers that appears everywhere in nature, connected with processes of growth and spiral shapes, among others. Many flowers have five petals, and fruits often have five compartments. Five, according to Plutarch, was also called nature by the Pythagoreans, because it is also automorphic, that is, all powers of five end with the digit 5. He also claimed that 'panta' (universe) comes from 'penta' (five).

Five is the first prime of the form $6n - 1$. All primes, except 2 and 3, are one more or one less than a multiple of 6. Five is the second Fermat number and the second Fermat prime. Only 5 Fermat primes are known to exist. Every number is the sum of 5 positive or negative cubes in an infinite number of ways.

There are 5 Platonic solids: the regular tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron and icosahedron. Euclid showed that there are no more than five. The square pyramid is a five-sided solid (pentahedron).

Five, then, is a number connected with life, growth, renewal and eternity.

The question comes to mind, for what particular reason should 5 figure so prominently in the third degree, when the Masonic age of the Master Mason (in the Scottish Rite) is 'seven years . . .' It is the Fellow-craft whose symbolic age is five, and

five appears repeatedly in his ritual: five orders of architecture, the five senses, etc. Even the blazing star, with the letter G, which is actually a pentagram, belongs to the second degree and not the third..The most plausible explanation for these discrepancies is the fact that originally Masonic rituals comprised at most two degrees, and possibly a single ritual divided into several parts. Another vestige of this situation is the fact that, in England at least, the installation ceremony for a new Master of the lodge is conducted in the second degree. In Scotland we find another peculiarity - Scots, after all, must demonstrate their independence!

The Mark Master degree, although given only to Master Masons, is worked within the lodge opened in the Second Degree.

The Substitute Words

Although their Hebrew origin is unquestionable, the Master's words have become corrupted and their exact meaning cannot be decided with certainty. The most plausible explanation, in this author's view, is that both refer to Hiram's death, one coming close to the Hebrew for 'the builder is dead' ('met haboneh') and the other for 'your son is dead' ('met benech'), as if addressing a woman. A Scottish pronunciation would make the close relation of the words clearer. The Hebrew 'met' can become 'mat' as in 'shachmat' (chess: literally 'the Shah is dead'). Jones (see the Bibliography at the end) mentions that in a Christian Dictionary printed in 1678, there are definitions for certain alternative Hebrew words which, we are told, mean 'the smiting of his son', 'the poverty of understanding' or 'the smiting of the builder' (p. 305). We can safely dismiss the middle explanation as misinformation, but the other two coincide rather closely with the explanation advanced above.

An interesting feature that must be noted is that both words now in use can be represented by the initial letters M and B, 8 which leads to the thought that perhaps both words have a common origin. Mendoza proposes a different theory, suggesting a Christian origin to the words, but he appears to be in the minority. As to why two words are in use, and not only one as in the first two degrees, it seems that before the joining of the two rival English Grand Lodges in 1813, the Ancients used one word while the Moderns used the other.

As no agreement could be reached to choose one word, a compromise was reached and both were left in use. Mendoza gives more details.

The Wider Context

Let us now examine Hiram's legend within the wider context of world mythology and religion. Some elements of the story are common to many mysteries in which a god or an extraordinary human being suffers death in order to be reborn to a higher state of existence. Let me list some of the more or less common features:

- The element of special wisdom or knowledge possessed by the victim.
- The element of betrayal.
- Burial and putrefaction or dismemberment of the body.
- Searching for the body or grave.
- Raising the body for identification or for a second burial.

- Vengeance and/or punishment of the perpetrator(s).

It has been suggested that Hiram's story may have been derived from the ancient foundation sacrifices, in which a human being was immured in the foundation of an intended structure, to provide it with a 'guardian soul.'

What is clear is that the Hiramic legend belongs in the tradition of classical initiation ceremonies, representing death and rebirth.

Anthropologists have described such rites in all cultures, and historians have transmitted to us similar solemnities in the ancient world, from Egypt, Persia, Greece and Rome. 'To die is to be initiated,' wrote Plutarch, making a play of words between teleutan and telesthai.

We could transpose the words, saying that to be initiated is to die... in order to be born again. Cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia, seven or eight thousand years old, already relate that Dammouzi (Tammuz), the lover of the goddess Ishtar, had been swallowed by the underworld, the kingdom of the dead, the country from which there is no return, the abode of darkness. Ishtar, known as 'widow of the Son of life' (another widow!) undertakes to release him and bring him back to life, which she does by going through a graded series of trials.

Among the Phoenicians, this myth became that of Astarte and Adonis. Adonis was the lover of Nature, that is, Astarte, who wept his death and finally resurrected him. Every spring, funeral ceremonies were held at Byblos (a city with particular relevance to Installed Masters). Weeping women tore their clothing and wounded their breasts, running about desperately, as if looking for someone. An empty coffin was placed in the temple, ready to receive the body, represented by a wooden statue that was first hidden, and then placed within the coffin. Towards the end of autumn the festival was repeated, with an important difference: grief and lamentations lasted for seven days, but on the eighth mourning gave way to uninhibited joy. The god had been reborn and ascended to heaven.

The Adonis of Phrygia was called Attis or Papas, the divine shepherd, consort of Cybele or Maa, goddess of the earth. The mysteries of Cybele were brought to Rome after the end of the Punic wars, and were celebrated in the eternal city with increasing enthusiasm during six hundred years.

In Egypt we find the myth of Isis and Osiris, too well known to repeat here.

The Greeks had not one, but several version of these legends. One, the mysteries of Cabires, in Samothrace, included the dramatic representation of the history of three brothers:

Axieros, Axiokersos and Axiokersa (note the alliteration!). According to the version reported by Firmicus Maternus, two of the Cabires killed the third and buried him at the foot of Mount Olympus. He was then brought back to life by Hermes, the god of the occult. Some Etruscan mirrors have engraved on the back scenes of this drama. In one, we see Axieros seized by his two brothers, before two columns with Corinthian capitals. In another, Hermes, accompanied by two satyrs serving as his assistants, approaches the corpse and tries to raise it with the help of his magic wand. The Cabires, like Hiram, are of Phoenician origin. In the mysteries of Mithra, as well, the initiate was symbolically

killed. Once, the emperor Commodus who was officiating as mystagogue - the conductor of the dead - got carried away by the drama and actually murdered the luckless initiate. Fortunately, no such mishap has ever happened in a Masonic ceremony! The Dionysian mysteries, also very popular in Rome, as in the Eastern provinces of the empire, featured the dismemberment of Dionysus, later reassembled and resurrected by Zeus. Some of these rites continued for many centuries after the spread of Christianity, sometimes disguised under a Christian cloak. D'Alviella (p. 77) mentions, for example, a ceremony held in the island of Malta in the 16th century, as recounted by an Arab writer. At the time of the feast of St. John, which coincided with the flowering of beans, the priests hid a statue of the saint under branches of flowering beans. The saint was then mourned as if dead. After three days, his return was celebrated; the statue was uncovered and carried in procession to the church. It is not difficult to perceive that the saint was acting as a surrogate for Dionysus.

The role of initiation in human society can be best summarized by quoting Mircea Eliade (p. 220): 'Initiation appears in all authentic human existence, for two reasons: on the one hand, because all authentic human life implies deep crises, trials, anguish, loss and recovery of the self, "death and rebirth"; on the other, because, no matter how full, all existence appears, at a certain moment, as an unfilled promise.'

'This is not a moral judgment about the past, but a vague feeling of having missed the vocation, of having betrayed the best within oneself. In such moments of total crisis, one hope only seems capable of providing salvation: the hope of being able to start life again. That is, in short, that we dream of a new existence, renewed, plentiful, and meaningful... The nostalgia of an initiatic renovation which arises sporadically in the heart of hearts of modern irreligious man, seems to us, therefore, as most significant: it would be, in the final analysis, the modern expression of man's eternal longing to find a positive meaning to death, to accept death as a rite of passage to a superior state of being.' 'If initiation can be said to be a distinctive dimension of human existence, this is due, above all, to the fact that only initiation assigns a positive task to death; to prepare the new birth, purely spiritual, access to a mode of being secure from the ravages of time.'

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Chapter Notes

1. Jones, p. 242.
2. Actually a small booklet of only 26 pages.
3. Jones, p. 318.
4. Nerval, Gerard de, Journey to the Orient, Chapter 12: Makbenah.
5. Well, p. 58.
6. A series in which each term is the sum of the two previous terms. It was christened the Fibonacci sequence by Eduard Lucas in 1877.
7. A polyhedron formed by equal plane faces that can be enclosed in a sphere.
8. Master Masons' aprons used in Scottish Rite lodges have the letters M and B on the front.
9. This explanation appears in the 1762 exposure Jachin and Boaz, quoted by Mendoza.
10. Goblet D'Alviella, p. 65.

End Chapter One

*Quantity discounts are available for Research Lodges and Book Clubs.
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